

FORTINBRAS AND LAERTES AND THE COMPOSITION OF *HAMLET*

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I

Some years ago, in discussing *Hamlet*, I observed that the role of Fortinbras appears to undergo a change as the action of the play works itself out.¹ The point is not one which has received much attention from the critics,² who, when they have concerned themselves with Fortinbras, have usually regarded him as a whole and consistent character. Yet since nothing is unimportant which may throw light on the workings of Shakespeare's imagination in the process of dramatic composition, I believe that this matter of Fortinbras's transformation merits a little scrutiny. And since the two roles will be found to impinge on one another, a consideration of Fortinbras must involve Laertes too.

Presumptuous as it may be to suppose that one can ever look into Shakespeare's mind in the act of composition, yet the plays themselves will often reveal something of how the material of the drama is being shaped and patterned. In particular a first act, concerned as it is to prepare lines for future development, may give clues to what the dramatist perceives as the opportunities of his subject. In the old story of *Hamlet*, as it came down from Saxo through Belleforest and an earlier Elizabethan play, it is clear that Shakespeare saw the focus of interest in the revenge of a son for his father's murder. The tremendous climax of his first act comes with the revelation of the murder to the son by the father's ghost, and it is a climax which was being prepared from the very opening words.

The play's first scene creates expectancy by the agitation of the soldiers on the watch, intensifies it by not one but two appearances of the Ghost, and then at the end makes the first reference to "young Hamlet," who must be told about the Ghost, they say, because "This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him." Before we even see the hero of the play he is known to us as the son of a dead king and the intended recipient of a message from his ghost. The second scene, at court, then introduces him, a solitary figure in mourning black, and his position as a son is what is emphasized as soon as he is addressed:

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son. . . .
How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

—Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun.

In this quibbling retort Hamlet repudiates the new king's attempt to claim him as *his* son and affirms his allegiance to his father. His refusal to be consoled for his father's loss makes the burden of the dialogue which follows. What Shakespeare is stressing here then is the bond between son and father; and the other situations which Shakespeare associates with Hamlet's serve to stress it still more. For Hamlet, though conspicuous from the beginning of the scene, is yet held back for its climax: he is the last in a series of three young men with whom the new king has to deal, and it will become apparent that Fortinbras and Laertes here lead up to Hamlet because their situations are designed to reflect his. Fortinbras, whom we have already had an account of in the first scene, can now be disposed of briefly and still does not appear. Yet he concerns the King and us as the son of a man killed by Hamlet's father who is now in arms to recover "lands lost by his father." Before a word is uttered by or to Hamlet, Fortinbras thus supplies an instance of what the son of a dead father might do. The young man we come to next is in a different case; he seeks no more than leave "to return to France." But when his suit is granted and then Hamlet's wish to go back to Wittenberg is opposed, these two are already set in contrast. Not less important, however, than the King's consent to Laertes' suit is the manner of his giving it. He is favorably inclined before he even knows what the suit is—because of what the throne of Denmark owes to Laertes' father; Laertes is asked if he has his father's leave to go, and Polonius's single speech is to say that he has given it him. The one thing we shall remember from this little episode is that Polonius and Laertes are father and son. And this is what the next scene continues to impress on us when it dramatizes Laertes' actual departure. The son requests and twice receives his father's blessing, and is kept on stage before us by a famous speech of fatherly advice. The critics may debate whether Polonius's "precepts" are wise or only meanly prudent, as also whether Claudius has shown himself a gracious monarch or only a smooth-tongued hypocrite; but what the theater audience will be sure of is the matter of family relationships. Hence, in a play so firmly centered on a son's call to avenge his father, no one need be surprised, when Polonius is killed, that Laertes should reappear to avenge *him*.

It is less inevitable, though not therefore less significant, that Fortinbras again provides a prelude for him. Fortinbras arrives on the Danish stage for the first time in Act IV scene 4, Laertes returns to it after a three-act absence in Act IV scene 5. Now, as the plot gathers complications, these two, juxtaposed with Hamlet in the second scene of the play, are at length

to move across his path. Ruth Nevo has recently observed how, in now bringing into "effective prominence" the "important contrast between the three avenging sons," *Hamlet* accords with a formal principle of Shakespearean tragedy whereby, after the hero's situation has reached its crisis in the third act, it is given significant perspective by means of ironic variations in the fourth.³

It is of course as unhesitant, unquestioning men of action that Fortinbras and Laertes both contrast with Hamlet. But (unlike the young men in an artificial comedy like *Love's Labour's Lost*) they complement rather than duplicate one another. The patterns of antithesis in which they figure are different and effected in different ways. First Hamlet watches Fortinbras leading his army to action and is given a long soliloquy to lament the comparison with himself. Fortinbras risks death for a "fantasy" of honor while he himself in his so much more substantial cause—"a father killed, a mother stained"—lets "all sleep." The sight of a prince stirred by "divine" ambition, who "Makes mouths at the invisible event," raises self-reproachful thoughts of the neglect of man's "godlike reason" or the cowardice of heeding the "event." No such explicit comment is necessary to point the significance of Laertes. His situation of seeking vengeance for his father's death instead of the reconquest of his lands brings him closer to the hero, as the play indeed, by its order, seems to acknowledge; and his every word and gesture stresses by implication what Hamlet does not do. After Hamlet in the soliloquy on Fortinbras has impressed on us that his deed is still "to do," Laertes bursts into the presence shouting "Where is this king?" As he demands of the King himself, "Give me my father . . . How came he dead? . . . I'll be revenged Most thoroughly for my father," it can hardly fail to occur to us that this is such a challenge as Hamlet might have, but has not yet, made. Hamlet has reflected on the conscience that makes "cowards of us all," but Laertes consigns conscience "to the profoundest pit"; Hamlet knows how a man may quail in "the dread of something after death," but Laertes dares "damnation." After Hamlet has failed to kill the King at prayer, Laertes boasts himself ready to cut his foe's throat in church. Even his noisiest rhetoric may be dramatically piquant:

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow
Of my true mother.

For we can hardly hear Laertes speak these words without recalling that Hamlet could not say them. We have heard him accuse *his* mother of "such an act" as "sets a blister" on "the fair forehead of an innocent love."

II

This last instance may also serve to remind us that the antithetical pattern

of revengers has at its foundation Hamlet's entire predicament and him in it. It is not wholly or simply a matter of contrasting characters, as criticism is a little liable to suggest. Bradley points out that among the characters in *Hamlet* we find "two, Laertes and Fortinbras, who are evidently designed to throw the character of the hero into relief," and adds that "even in the situations there is a curious parallelism; for Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is the son of a king, lately dead, and succeeded by his brother; and Laertes, like Hamlet, has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him."⁴ Yet this seems to place the emphasis the wrong way round. Shakespeare does not create characters to serve as foils to Hamlet and then devise situations to exhibit them. Nor is the parallelism of situation "curious" (unless in the matter of Fortinbras's uncle); for without it Fortinbras and Laertes would have no *raison d'être*. It is as the sons of fathers who have been killed that they are brought into the play at all, and whatever characters they respectively acquire they acquire through the performance of their roles.

Neither of them figures of course in the story as it was told by Saxo and Belleforest. Whether or not they were Shakespeare's own invention is concealed from us by the failure of the older play about Hamlet to survive; the question is one which has elicited contradictory views.⁵ I have my own opinion, which may later become apparent; but perhaps in a large perspective it does not supremely matter. What does is to see the play of *Hamlet*, as it takes shape in Shakespeare's imagination, with or without the assistance of some dramatist predecessor, acquiring both a principle of form and a significance of idea that the original story lacked. Yet although the original story knew nothing of other sons than Hamlet, it could supply predicaments in which other sons could be placed. For Hamlet's father was not the only man in the story to be killed. There was the King of Norway overcome in armed combat, and there was the counselor killed hiding in the Queen's chamber. For a dramatist intent on the theme of a son revenging his father it was an invention as economical as brilliant to allow these other slaughtered men to leave sons behind them too. But this means that the dramatist accepted for these new-created sons the situations which the story laid down for them in advance. It is not enough for us to say with Bradley that Fortinbras "is the son of a king, lately dead" and that Laertes "has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him." It is equally essential that Fortinbras's father was killed by Hamlet's father and that Laertes' father was killed by Hamlet himself. Certainly the situations of these other aggrieved sons will reflect Hamlet's and will give opportunity for those character-contrasts which Shakespeare has so notably—and notably—exploited; but it is not less important that Fortinbras and Laertes, if they are to come into the play at all, must enter it as Hamlet's enemies.

For Laertes in particular this destiny is inescapable. The dramatist who

introduces him, so naturally yet so pointedly, as Polonius's son obviously knows that it will be his role to seek the hero's life. And this is a role which, once added to the story, must profoundly modify the hero's own. For it becomes Hamlet's role not only to call his uncle to account but to be called to account himself. The dramatic complexity of Hamlet's situation reflects the moral complexity of his being wronger as well as wronged. If criticism has insufficiently remarked this, it may be because Shakespeare's Hamlet, for all that he says about the revenge he is commanded to, is less explicit about the one that he must suffer. When he sees Laertes' cause as the image of his own, he does not add, though the play, through his quarrel with Laertes, does, that the image may be inverted. Yet when the body of Polonius is before him, he clearly grasps his dual role:

Heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this and this with me.

And it is a dual role which Shakespeare must have envisaged for him from the start. This, I venture to suggest, is what made him interesting to Shakespeare. For instead of the orthodox comment that Laertes "is put into the play to exhibit the primitive avenger Hamlet is temperamentally unfitted to be,"⁶ it might be nearer the truth to say that putting Laertes into the play unfits Hamlet to be the primitive avenger. Granted his dual role, he must acquire a dual nature as one capable of good and evil, and if the drama is to express this through the medium of his own speech he must become aware of it himself. So it is not entirely strange if he has much to say about the condition of man, "crawling between earth and heaven," partaking of both god and beast. To define Hamlet's role is not of course—as it may be with Laertes—to define his character, the most discussed of all the characters of literature, still less to explain how this eloquent, profound, many-sided and enigmatic character grew in Shakespeare's mind. But the dual role I see as the genesis of Hamlet's character and this is where I think the clue to its understanding must lie.

III

The role of Laertes, then, though simple, is in its consequence dramatically momentous. That of Fortinbras is both less momentous and more ambiguous. Though the story offers him the role of a dead king's son, it puts him in a situation where he less faithfully images Hamlet. He seems to begin life, it is true, as the play's third avenging son, but he has important disqualifications for this part. His father's deathsmen being already dead, unless he should pursue a vendetta against his son and heir, he lacks a personal antagonist; and of the three bereaved sons in the play he is the only one whose father met his death in honorable combat. Shakespeare no doubt recognized these drawbacks, and sought not to diminish but to capitalize

them. Far from seeking to provide Fortinbras with a just grievance, he emphasizes that he had none. His father was defeated in fair fight and the "pactes" which governed this in Belleforest become in Shakespeare "a sealed compact Well ratified by law and heraldry," which not only enhances King Hamlet's chivalry and valor but puts a would-be avenger quite firmly in the wrong. Nor is there any suggestion that Fortinbras might have sought redress for his father's defeat by a return contest with the victor's son. The aim allotted to Fortinbras is not to requite his father's death but to recover what he has forfeited. In Belleforest this was a treasure-ship; the shift to royal lands transforms what might have been a personal quarrel into a matter of armies and kingdoms. It is an important function of the Norwegian prince in Shakespeare to give an international background to the troubles of the Danish court. He becomes the foe less of Hamlet than of Denmark. Yet if Fortinbras is thus not cast for such an avenger as Laertes was inevitably to be, the circumstance that brings him into the play—the combat between the kings—must still set the two princely sons in opposition. If Norway is to leave a son behind him, "young Fortinbras" will be the counterpart of "young Hamlet." Shakespeare indeed matches them by the use of the same epithet and invites us to compare them from the first.

Fortinbras has the dubious advantage over Laertes that his father is already dead and he can begin his role at once. In fact, though his actual appearance will be deferred till the fourth act, within a hundred lines of the play's opening he is reported already in action, his menace enhanced by being associated with the "portentous figure" of the Ghost. His attempt to regain by force what his father fairly lost is as dubious in its nature as its occasion:

Young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle, hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of lawless resolute
For food and diet to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in't.

But for all this disorderliness of unrestrained passion, the very rashness of ungoverned youth has in it something not unadmirable. In the "mettle hot and full" there is a fiery spirit, and the readiness for an "enterprise" of "stomach" betrays an adventurous daring. This is something we shall remember when all but two acts ahead the other prince, the hero of the play, confesses himself "a dull and muddy-mettled rascal," asks if he is "a coward," and decides he must be "pigeon-livered." Evidently when describing Fortinbras's "mettle" Shakespeare already had in mind another who would be said to lack it. "Dull" is precisely what his father's ghost would warn Hamlet not to be—

Duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst thou not stir in this.

Hamlet's exclamation that he is "dull and muddy-mettled" is provoked by the passion of the Player, not of Fortinbras, but when at length he encounters Fortinbras with his army the occasion is again one to show up his "dull" revenge. The contrast between the two princes, prepared for in the opening scene, is explicitly confirmed in Act IV.

Yet Fortinbras's enterprise, we notice, is not now the same. It is still a somewhat dubious one, risking thousands of men's lives for a minute piece of land not big enough to hold them. But it is not land lost by his father, of whom we have ceased to hear. Fortinbras's story has turned out a strange one. For after Denmark has sent ambassadors to Norway in the first act and they have returned home in the second, his threat to Denmark is over and his forces are safely diverted against Poland. So all he requires of Denmark now, instead of the return of his father's lands, is "quiet pass" across Danish territory en route to his new foe; and accordingly when he actually appears in Act IV he is on his way to Poland and "craves" of the Danish king the "promised march" over his kingdom. All this is perfectly coherent and consistent with itself. What is not dramatically consistent is that the menace of Fortinbras's "lawless resolute" in the first scene should create an expectation which fails to be fulfilled. Why so much about the danger of invasion if so little was to come of it? Is it even consistent on the level of verisimilitude for there to be, day and night seven days a week, a "sweaty haste" of casting cannon and building ships if a formal embassy to Norway was enough to get the invasion called off? Surely more was purposed by those warlike preparations than the substantiation of Fortinbras's "mettle." Does it not look as though, even between the first scene which describes the preparations and the second in which the embassy is despatched, Shakespeare had somewhat modified his plan? Can it be that the troops who ultimately do no more than march across Denmark were originally designed to do battle?

It seems also worth remarking that when they were at their most threatening in the opening scene, nothing was heard of Fortinbras's uncle, the reigning King of Norway. He is first mentioned in the second scene when Claudius appeals to him to suppress his nephew's escapade (to name it by what it now seems to have shrunk to). Others besides Bradley have pointed to this uncle on the throne of Norway as completing the correspondence between Fortinbras's position and Hamlet's and have supposed him created for that end. But it might conceivably have been that Denmark's reigning uncle suggested a parallel for Norway not so much to balance the Norwegian prince with Hamlet as to provide a means of extricating him from an enterprise that had already gone too far for the drama's unfolding plan.

This is not something to feel sure of, since the opening account of Fortinbras finding his desperadoes in the "skirts" or outlying parts of Norway certainly does not regard *him* as a reigning monarch, so that it leaves the way for his uncle open. On the other hand, it is sometimes pointed out that if the dead Fortinbras forfeited literally "all those his lands Which he stood seized of," there should be no king of Norway at all.⁷ This too is not a point that I should wish to press: for Shakespeare, had he meant that, might have referred to the lost lands as the Norwegian kingdom, and he did not. "All" may derive from Belleforest, who applies it, however, to the treasure (*toutes les richesses*) in the king's ship; the difficulty arises through transferring the forfeit to lands. It is not one that is likely to have occurred to Shakespeare, who could hardly have foreseen the arguments which might be based upon a single emphatic phrase, when what clearly matters to the play is not the specification of the lands but their sufficiency as a motive for Fortinbras's filial "enterprise."

There still remains, however, the discrepancy between the fear his enterprise occasions in the opening scene and the ease of its suppression. Something that begins by being important to the action of the play is subsequently not. And it is at least a little unexpected that the young prince "of unimproved mettle hot and full" should turn out to be so docile. His bed-ridden uncle has only to learn what he is up to and "he, in brief, obeys, Receives rebuke from Norway," and promises never more to take up arms against Denmark. It is not the less surprising in that this meek and easily swayed youth is not only a fearless leader but a very capable army officer—as appears from his being able to transform his desperadoes, the "lawless resolute" he "sharked up," into a perfectly disciplined force. When the time comes for them to pass across the stage and the kingdom of Denmark, nothing could better the decorum with which they respect the terms of their license. Fortinbras has only to say "Go softly on" to command their ordered and silent obedience, though Granville-Barker is the only critic I have found to remark on this.⁸

And yet the dangerously hot-mettled youth of the opening scene has not been allowed to vanish. The fourth act gives indeed a rather terrifying description of him in Shakespeare's favorite image for rebellion:

The ocean, overpeering of his list,
Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,
O'erbears your officers.

And his "lawless resolute" are still with him, "the rabble" who call him lord. Heedless of all precedent and tradition upon which a stable society must be based—"Antiquity forgot, custom not known"—they reject even their legal sovereign, crying "Choose we! Laertes shall be king." And the doors of the palace "are broke."

What has happened, then, is that the "lawless resolute" originally sharked up by Fortinbras have been switched to Laertes. That Shakespeare, for whatever reason, has modified his initial plan I do not think it possible to dispute.

Fortinbras is still able to fulfill part of the role for which he was created. He still has his army and his enterprise, and the enterprise, although a new one, is still one which defies rational justification, as Hamlet does not forbear to remark. As the dauntless man of action he is still available for the designed contrast with the inactive self-questioning hero, in which he still exhibits the paradox of a man of a daring spirit in a dubious undertaking. The peculiar subtlety of the contrast lies in an ambivalence too often unperceived—as by critics who cannot allow Hamlet and Shakespeare to think that something not fine in itself may yet be finely pursued—and it may be thought to gain in subtlety now that Fortinbras, instead of an irregular adventurer heading a disorderly uprising, has become a "delicate and tender prince" conducting a well-disciplined campaign. But now that he no longer fights for his father's lands, he has quite ceased to be an avenger and almost even a son; and the part of his role which made him the warring foe of Denmark has ended with its initial menace.

It may be that Shakespeare came to see that the play would not have room for such embroilments. But I suspect that the cause of the change was deeper. For it might well seem that the threat to peace would come more appropriately from within Denmark than without. The role of revenger, at any rate, for which Fortinbras was never perfectly suited, is more capably filled by Laertes, groomed for it from the outset, as soon as events are ready for him to take it over. And if he takes over with it the menace of insurrection, is it not because this comes to be seen as belonging to the revenger's role? At least we are given a glimpse, when the Danes rise in support of Laertes, of what they might have done for Hamlet and of what the dangers of action could be. It is true that the rebellion, for one that "looks so giant-like," is very soon over; so that Granville-Barker found it "not in itself very convincing" and decided that Shakespeare avoided "enlarging the play's action" lest "wider issues" should detract from the personal conflict.⁹ Yet it is surely rather to be remarked that the rebellion, though short-lived, does happen and has a formidable appearance for the moment that it lasts. The persistence of this motif, even when it was shed by Fortinbras with whom it began, suggests that it was one Shakespeare was not willing to relinquish. We shall not be prying too curiously, I submit, if we perceive that at some level of his mind the idea of armed rebellion would not dissociate itself from the Hamlet story; and it cannot but be, I think, that even while the play presents revenge as a bounden duty to which Hamlet's whole nature must commit him, Shakespeare also saw it as striking at the roots of civil order.

It may also be remarked that rebellion calls forth an assured reminder, though staggeringly ironic from Claudius, of the divinity that "doth hedge a king"; and, more significantly, that at the very center of the play, when "The Mousetrap" has brought home to Claudius his danger and he is arranging to pack Hamlet off to England, there occurs that strangely resonant speech, from the unlikely lips of Rosencrantz, about "the cease of majesty," describing how the death of a king, reverberating through innumerable lesser lives, brings them to "boisterous ruin."¹⁰ These are sentiments more expected in the history plays, from which they may seem little more than a survival. Yet they have their relevance in a tragedy which holds one king under threat of death for the death he gave to another king, and they suggest what vibrations may be set up in the mind by the story of Hamlet's revenge for the murder of his father.

IV

Fortinbras's role as we now have it links him inseparably with Poland; and this raises a further question. The political geography of the play embraces a good part of northern Europe, and although Poland is kept well in the background, its connection with the action is precise. We recall that it was against "the Polack" that Fortinbras's uncle supposed his nephew's forces were directed; that once he discovered they were not, he took care that they should be, even to the securing for them of safe passage across Denmark; and that accordingly, when Fortinbras at length appears, he is marching against Poland, just as it is from Poland that he arrives back in Denmark at the end. The Polack as well as we seems to have been well warned of the attack, for he had already garrisoned the disputed "patch of ground"; and he therefore shares the infection of the political disease upon which Hamlet comments. It is his dramatic function to be a party in Fortinbras's war. But was this the function the drama first envisaged for him, or, when the role of Fortinbras underwent a change, did that of Poland change with it?

The question is not an impertinent one, for apart from the fact that it was not Fortinbras's first intention, nor surely Shakespeare's either, to take those "lawless resolute" to Poland, there is an initial reference to the Poles, very early in the play, which attaches them to quite a different action. It occurs of course in Horatio's account of Hamlet's father directly after the first appearance of the Ghost:

So frowned he once, when in an angry parle
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.

These lines have proved controversial; it is said that one does not deal blows in parley, and the Polacks themselves, through the spelling of the substantive texts (*pollax*) and a Fourth-Folio emendation, have sometimes been turned into a pole-axe. But contemporary accounts show that in the

marshy parts of Lithuania, which was then a part of Poland, the inhabitants regularly travelled in winter in horse-drawn sledges over the frozen pools. Clearly the smiting of the Polacks was a valiant exploit of King Hamlet's like that of his combat against "Norway" with which the dialogue couples it. Almost at once the play goes on to a fuller narrative of the combat against Norway; and one might not unreasonably look for a similar elaboration later of its companion exploit. It is true that the Norwegian episode derives—with or without the intermediacy of the lost play—from Belleforest, who supplies no equivalent for the Polacks; yet whether it came to Shakespeare from some undiscovered source or lay in his own invention, some incident of a battle on the ice had a vivid if momentary lodging in his imagination. This is as much as one can say for certain; more may be idle surmise. Yet if the incident did hold potentialities for development, the play itself, though it chose not to exploit them, may suggest what some of them were. If initial symmetry were kept, the threat of attack from Norway might have been matched by another from Poland—until the play by a neat device set them against one another instead; and young Fortinbras, seeking to recover the lands his father lost, might have had a counterpart in a Polack son attempting retaliation for the smiting on the ice. If any such possibility in fact occurred to Shakespeare, it must have been dismissed as early as the second scene, when the sending of ambassadors to Norway prepares for the switch of Fortinbras's campaign and when the introduction of the son of the counselor who is destined to be killed by Hamlet shows the play's clear recognition of who its second revenger must be. Yet has anyone ever satisfactorily explained why Shakespeare chose for this counselor a name which to any Elizabethan would inevitably connect him with Poland, or, as they used to call it, Polonia? Attempts to find an original for him in some Polonian figure outside the play have not been so obviously successful as to rule out the alternative, and perhaps more natural, possibility, that Polonius's name arose in Shakespeare's mind because something associated him there with the Poland of the play.

V

The counselor and his son, as they appear in the play, even when Laertes has attracted Fortinbras's "lawless resolute" to him, are characters still in one piece, as Fortinbras is not. Once we have seen that his role changes from that of a hotheaded insurrectionary to that of a dignified soldier prince, it becomes almost absurd to discuss him as if he were a single coherent person. Yet even Granville-Barker, while observing his new courtesy, supposes that the expedition to Poland will prove his "unimproved mettle." L. C. Knights in condemning this Polish expedition makes a point of its being undertaken by "the same Fortinbras who, earlier in the play, had

'shark'd up a list of lawless resolute' to regain the land lost by his father"; Harold Fisch sees him risking death in Poland with "devil-may-care impetuosity"; and Kenneth Muir insists that Hamlet's "delicate and tender prince," having "secretly mustered a band of soldiers, who seem little better than brigands," is really a "barbarous adventurer" all the time.¹¹ Eleanor Prosser goes still farther in relating Fortinbras's character to a coherence of design: she maintains that by introducing him as "a brash and inexperienced young hothead" Shakespeare has carefully prepared us to see him and his Polish campaign "in their true light," which will show them as "completely amoral." Perhaps it is no wonder that she finds "matter for alarm" when he returns to Denmark, and can "see no hope" for the country when he succeeds to the throne.¹² But Miss Prosser is hardly accurate in contending that Fortinbras "has no rights" in the kingdom; for when the play's last scene allows him to say that he has, we cannot use its first scene to disprove this. The play has only neglected to explain what his rights are, apparently not having foreseen that he would need them. What we can, and surely must, say is that the reckless and lawless youth of the opening scene could not have had the dying Hamlet's vote, nor Shakespeare's, and was not meant to have it. But in Fortinbras's subsequent role as a commander not reckless nor lawless, but calm, well-governed and well-obeyed, efficient and victorious, Shakespeare has discovered for him the yet further role of a ruler to whom Denmark may safely be left.

It would be interesting to know precisely when the idea came to him for Fortinbras's final role. It must, I think, have been emerging when Hamlet was allowed to perceive, what his critics still do not, the paradoxical greatness of the prince who campaigned for a straw. That Shakespeare must have seen by that stage that there would be little competition—for it was hardly a role for Horatio—does not make his election of Fortinbras a less felicitous act of opportunism. The choice does involve, however, yet another shift for Fortinbras in the dramatic pattern. For even the designed contrast between his "mettle" and the hero's, prepared for on his first introduction and confirmed in their fourth-act encounter, has all but disappeared in the mutual esteem whereby Fortinbras receives Hamlet's "dying voice" and in return pronounces his funeral tribute.

Laertes, unlike Fortinbras, enacts in the play's last scene the role for which he was intended from the beginning. Coming into the play as Polonius's son, he was as revenger to be Hamlet's image but also and ineluctably his enemy. It is the coming together, in league against the hero, of the two opposite antagonists, the man his vengeance seeks and the man whose vengeance seeks him, that gives the catastrophe its subtlety, though this again is a subtlety, like that of Hamlet's dual role which causes it, too often overlooked. A typical comment is that of R. A. Law: "The protagonist here meets and personally overcomes both of his villainous antagonists.

One of these villains repents and is forgiven in dying; the chief villain dies unmourned."¹³ As Claudius's accomplice, matching his principal's stratagem of the unbated sword with a venom of his own procuring, Laertes no doubt deserves to be called a villain—how else could we tolerate a tragedy in which the hero, having already killed his father, now kills him? But what the critic fails to observe is the distinction the play makes between the villains, of which the repentance and forgiveness of one of them is the token. Moreover Hamlet not only overcomes; he is also overcome—by the villain he has called his "brother"; and Laertes is not only forgiven; in dying he also forgives:

Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee.

The words in which Hamlet is forgiven remind one of the wrong he has done: his responsibility for a "father's death" is recalled just as his own father's murderer is dying at his hands.

Laertes, as the son of his father, finally fulfills his role by helping Hamlet to fulfill his. But Fortinbras, who also began as the son of his father, has moved through a series of changes to a very different status. In one thing he is constant: for his various roles all present him in a martial character, which ultimately unites the fiery mettle of his beginning with the superb decorum of his final speech. Shakespeare is a deep and far-sighted planner; he is also a brilliant improviser. He appears in both roles in *Hamlet*, and both of them contribute to the fine artistry of its ending.

NOTES

1. "The Tragedy of Revenge in Shakespeare and Webster," *Shakespeare Survey* 14 (1961), 46-47. I ask indulgence if I repeat here one or two sentences from this earlier essay.

2. The outstanding exception is H. D. Gray, "Reconstruction of a Lost Play," *Philological Quarterly* 7 (1928), 260-263. See below, note 7.

3. *Tragic Form in Shakespeare* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 24-26.

4. *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1904), p. 90.

5. See, on opposite sides, W. W. Lawrence, "Hamlet and Fortinbras," *PMLA* 61 (1946), 673 ff.; and R. A. Law, "Belleforest, Shakespeare, and Kyd," *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies* (Washington, 1948), pp. 279 ff.

6. Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence* (London, 1972), p. 65.

7. This is stressed especially by H. D. Gray (see above, note 2). I do not think it answers his objection to suggest with E. A. J. Honigsmann (*Stratford-upon-Avon Studies* 5, p. 134) that "lands Which he stood seized of" could refer to "lands seized . . . in war"; nor to say with W. W. Lawrence (pp. 683-684) that the uncle in Norway is only a tributary king—for this would make him, if only by permit, the holder of the forfeited lands and make nonsense of Fortinbras's campaign to get them back from Denmark.

Gray supposes, partly on the strength of references to Fortinbras and Norway in *Der*

Bestrafte Brudermord, that Fortinbras must have been in the *ur-Hamlet*, in which he envisages Hamlet seeking revenge for his father's death and Fortinbras campaigning for his father's lands joining forces together against Claudius. He conjectures that Shakespeare began with such a scheme in mind but then dropped the plot of revenge by force of arms for the more psychological drama that we know. Without wishing to extend speculation about the contents of an irrecoverable play, I find insuperable objections to this theory: Hamlet, if he is to remain an honorable revenger, cannot be in league with a foreign prince against the Danish king; Fortinbras, so long as he is his father's son, must stand *against* Hamlet, forced by the pattern of the story to be opponent and not ally; and finally, a play with such a plot as Gray outlines, having moved farther away from the traditional story than Shakespeare does, could not really be an *ur-Hamlet*.

8. Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: III, Hamlet* (London, 1937), p. 129: "Incidentally the courtesy of his speech belies his and his army's earlier reputation."

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

10. On the significance of this passage and its placing, see Keith Brown, "Form and Cause Conjoined," *Shakespeare Survey* 26 (1973), p. 18.

11. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare, III*, p. 129; Knights, *An Approach to Hamlet* (London, 1960), pp. 81-82; Fisch, *Hamlet and the Word* (New York, 1971), p. 47; Muir, *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence*, pp. 61-63.

12. *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, 1967), pp. 210, 236.

13. "Belleforest, Shakespeare, and Kyd," p. 292.